

[Public Art & Community Attachment](#)

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May 16, 2012

Animating Democracy: Social Impact & Evaluation Blog Salon

Working in the field of public art automatically puts us in touch with the public, art, and its social context.

In fact, public art may be one of a community's most overlooked and underappreciated cultural assets; it's accessible "on the street", any time, free to all, without a ticket, and diverse in content. It can be enjoyed spontaneously, alone, or in groups, and by culture seekers as well as new audiences.

There is data out there that supports the benefits of public art to the community.

The Knight Foundation and Gallup Corporation's [Soul of the Community](#) study, for example, indicates that community attachment creates an emotional connection to place (which also correlates to local economic growth). They determined that the key drivers of attachment are social offerings, openness, and the aesthetics of place—all potential attributes of public art.

It's fascinating that these drivers scored higher than education, basic services and safety, and the economy. Also, a local summer visitors survey conducted by the Greater Philadelphia Marketing & Tourism Corporation (GPTMC) found that of the city's ten most popular outdoor activities, *outdoor art* ranked second—above hiking, jogging, and biking.

Public art can create community attachment, if we overcome perceived barriers and open pathways for engagement. With this in mind, the Fairmount Park Art Association developed [Museum Without Walls™: AUDIO](#) (MWW:AUDIO)—a multi-platform interactive audio experience, available for free on the street by cell phone, audio download, Android and iPhone [mobile app](#), QR code, or online as streaming audio and audio slideshows.

While our delivery system is comprehensive and impressive, our primary goal was to develop a conceptually sound, content-rich program that could be adapted to new technology over time. In my opinion, getting too caught up in the technology is a trap; it's like jumping on a high-speed train, without knowing where you're headed.

MWW:AUDIO was inspired by the idea that there is a unique story, civic effort, and creative expression behind every public sculpture in Philadelphia—and that an ideal way to tell each story is in the environment and context of city life.

We identified the "spontaneous viewer" as an audience unique to public art: this person typically has not planned ahead, paid a museum admission, or signed up in advance for a cultural tour. Because our intent is to attract people on the street, we've used "real estate" type signs and bus shelter posters to call attention to the program.

The hallmark feature of MWW:AUDIO is the use of an "authentic voice" model—that is, people from all walks of life who are personally connected to the sculpture. Nearly 100 "voices" from all walks of life are featured: artists, curators, scientists, writers, historians, civic leaders, and family descendants.

Because each person has something distinctive to communicate, each speaks with enthusiasm and delight. There's no narrator, so listening is almost like eavesdropping into a fascinating conversation. Some of my

favorite audios are [Iroquois](#), [Jesus Breaking Bread](#), [LOVE](#), the [James A. Garfield Monument](#), and—yes—the movie prop from [Rocky](#).

Our planning process integrated evaluation throughout, and we worked with [Randi Korn & Associates, Inc.](#) to develop a formative evaluation instrument. We defined the qualities of the audio program that we wanted to measure—including that listeners feel that they have learned something of value, prompting a sense of curiosity about Philadelphia’s public art.

Our findings indicated that people wanted to “get smart” and “Almost all of the participants said the audio programs evoked new ideas about the sculptures and helped them look more closely at a work of art they had previously passed by without much notice.”

The impact of the program has been both positive and measurable.

For the first time ever, we have quantitative tools to track our audience and guide our programmatic development. When we launched the project, the total number of visits to our websites increased 300 percent compared to traffic in the three months prior. With analytics we are able to measure the program’s impact by tracking the time, location, and call duration of participants, resulting in more than 25,000 in-depth audience contacts. We have also experienced an increase in Facebook fans, people opting-in to our mailing list, and membership donations.

The qualitative audience response has also been overwhelmingly positive. We are able to receive direct user feedback through our cell-phone system, and one particular feedback message reinforced the broad reach of MWW:AUDIO.

Trolley driver Carl Brown left us the following message: “I drive a Philadelphia trolley, and drive pass number 12 (the [All Wars Memorial to Colored Soldiers and Sailors](#)) everyday...and I think it’s wonderful that you have this program set up. It was educational. It was educational for me, and emotional, as an African-American. It makes me feel much better to be a part of Philadelphia.”